UK winter - A sense of reason

11 October 2011 - Over the past few weeks, there have been some colourful headlines in some parts of the media about what's in store for this year's winter in the UK.

Reports of '-20C within weeks', 'A winter fuel crisis on the way' and 'Widespread snow in October' have all raised expectations that we're in for an 'Arctic winter'.

In an opinion piece for The Times, John Hirst - Chief Executive of the Met Office - calls for a sense of reason in response to the claims and makes clear these forecasts are not from Met Office.

He states: "[These headlines] bear no relation to the kinds of weather that forecasters at the Met Office are currently expecting - there is no need for alarm. These stories do reflect our national obsession with the weather but they can also confuse and even scare vulnerable people. The Met Office's job is to provide accurate and reliable information and at this stage we see no scientific evidence to support these premature predictions.

"In fact the scientific capability does not exist to allow such extremes to be identified on a long-range timescale... no forecaster can say whether we'll see a week of -20C temperatures in Manchester in the second week of December. This does not mean that harsh winter conditions are not possible, just that they cannot be identified at the moment."

He continues: "As winter approaches, local government and businesses are preparing for the worst that the British weather can throw at us. But the fact that local authorities are stocking up on grit is no cause for alarm. This is what contingency planners do. In fact, their preparations are encouraging because they mean the country should be in a good position to respond to our short-range forecasts of severe weather.

"Last year there was some confusion between our longer-range outlook which provided good advice over the whole winter - as January and February were relatively mild - and our shorter-range forecasts that correctly identified the prolonged cold and snowy weather early in the winter. In fact, our forecasts of where and when it would snow were second to none. Although it is not possible to prevent disruption, our detailed forecasts allowed agencies to put their resources in the right place at the right time to ensure that it was kept to a minimum."

He concludes: "In recent years we have seen great scientific and technological advances that allow us to warn of impending severe weather with ever greater lead times and with ever greater detail. Rest assured that this year the Met Office will continue to offer that service, warning of any severe weather in plenty of time to get out the gritters - and the jumpers - when it matters."

You can see the full and unabridged piece in The Times (registration required).

Contact information

Met Office Press Office: **+44 (0)1392 886655**

E-mail: Press Office

Met Office Customer Centre: **01392 885680**

If you're outside the UK: **+44 1392 885680**

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